



# What Does the Church Need to *Be* in America Today?

When I ask other Christians if they think it realistic to expect more for the American church than what it consists of today, I generally get one of four responses:

- (a) “What more *is* there?”  
(shallow optimism)
- (b) “Are you *kidding*?”  
(despairing cynicism)
- (c) “Who knows?”  
(disengaged apathy)
- (d) “Oh, God, I hope so...”  
(pained but expectant yearning)

While some variant of the first three responses is the most common, I vastly prefer the last one because, unlike the others, it implies the promise of a dialogue in which I deeply desire to engage fellow believers. Therefore, I am grateful for the forum provided by this new *PRISM* column because it expands my opportunity for conversation with brothers and sisters whose taste of the gospel has them wanting more for the American church, particularly in these times. This column is for those of you who *believe* in what the church can be, not out of confidence in technique or methodology, but rather because of the gospel’s power to deliver people from captivity. You *love* the church, not because you’ve found a congregation that fulfills your requirements or agrees with your personal sense of things, but rather because she is the beloved bride of Christ, through whom the “wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and

authorities in the heavenly places.” You *mourn* for the church in this country because you see her largely in bondage. And, like my congregation and me, you long for company.

I am deeply blessed to be a part of a congregation in San Francisco led by pastors whose singular passion for the gospel refuses to allow their parishioners to settle for woefully inadequate identification with either “conservative evangelicalism” on one side or “religious progressivism” on the other. From the beginning our pastors have consistently held out the question of what it means to *be the church*, an ecclesiological pursuit that, if taken seriously, assumes a conversion that will put us at odds with the surrounding culture. We seek to embrace corporately a Good News that, by its very nature, has profoundly political dimensions. In other words, proclamation of a triumphal, cross-bearing King presupposes that war is being waged, in heaven and earth, between God and the pretenders of this age. Therefore, as a congregation we believe we are at our healthiest when our worship leads to collective discernment—and repudiation—of such pretenders. Only then can we begin to embody hope to a nation mired in a massive and exasperating ideological game of red and blue.

I begin this column on the heels of a particularly instructive election season, not so much because of what was said, but because of what was not said. Staying true to the advice of their pricey and science-savvy marketing consultants, our presidential candidates catered relentlessly to our economic insecurities, pietistic sensibilities, and self-preservationist instincts. We were inundated, week after arduous week, with endless banter over who can best revive the economy, preserve the traditional American family structure, and lead military excursions with manly competence. What the public discourse remains clear of is any reflection

on the root causes of poverty and racism, their relationship to U.S. foreign policy, the global costs of our “national interests,” and the impact of fear-driven nationalism on our collective character. Silence on these issues makes perfect sense along the campaign trail, for political strategists are keen to tiptoe around America’s sacred cows. However, the commensurate silence of the American church unmasks her subservience to golden calves she can no longer see.

Do we as the church have the wherewithal to call an idol an idol? Are we prepared to suffer the consequences? This is a question that continues to challenge us here in San Francisco, a city that revels in its liberal progressiveness while pricing out its poor; a mecca of tourism whose success hinges on an underpaid, immigrant labor force; a local government willing to speak out on the use of force, while hosting Pacific Rim multinationals whose designs *depend* on that force. Faithfulness to the gospel in such a context is complex, as I’m sure it is in yours—but let’s work on it, shall we? For if we long for the church truly *to be the church* in America today, we really have no other option. Together, let us expect greater things of the church, not because it is “realistic” but because the gospel mercifully and graciously insists that we do so.

May the conversation begin... ■

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